

CIVIL WAR IMAGES: DEPICTIONS OF AFRICAN AMERICANS IN THE WAR EFFORT

This resource was created by Devon Burger, the 2016 Liljenquist Family Fellow at the Library of Congress.

Soldiers, sailors, nurses, artisans, laborers, officers, scouts, and spies: African Americans were at the center of the Civil War from the moment it began, and took on a wide variety of roles in the war's conduct and resolution.



Dutch Gap, Virginia. Picket station of Colored troops near Dutch Gap canal.

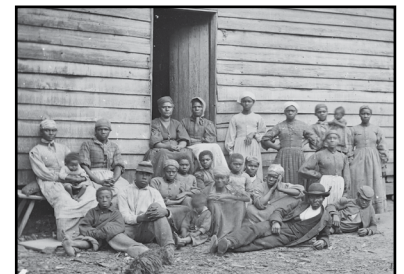
<https://www.loc.gov/item/cwp2003004888/PP/>

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The visual depictions that were created during the war provide an opportunity to explore the many different ways in which African Americans—free and enslaved, in Union and Confederate states—advanced the war effort. However, these images also encourage us to examine the many ways in which artists, photographers, and publishers chose to depict African Americans in the war effort, and to consider their reasons for doing so. At the same time, the relative scarcity of such images serves as a reminder of the many participants, and the many stories, that are excluded from this crucial moment in the nation's history.

Only a few weeks into the war, a dash to freedom brought African Americans into the conflict in a new role. In May 1861, three enslaved African American men escaped Confederate territory and sought refuge at the Union's Fort Monroe. When the Confederate officer who legally owned the men asked that they

be returned, the fort's commander, General Benjamin Butler, refused, declaring that the men were "contraband of war." In August of the same year, Congress codified Butler's policy by passing the First Confiscation Act, which invalidated the claims of slave owners to escaped slaves who had been used on behalf of the Confederacy.



"Contrabands" at Foller's house

<https://www.loc.gov/item/cwp2003000055/PP/>

Thousands of fugitives escaped slavery at great risk by fleeing to Union lines, and many became involved in the Union war effort. This development sparked heated controversy in both the Union and the Confederacy, and images of people identified as "contrabands"—sometimes portrayed in a positive

light, other times rendered as insulting caricatures—began appearing in political cartoons, on envelopes, and on pieces of music.

Although thousands of free African American men were eager to join the Union army, for the first several months of the war they were forbidden to do so. However, African Americans found many other ways to support the Union's war efforts during this period. Anticipating future involvement, some African American men formed military training companies or other military units, while others volunteered as servants for Union army officers or worked for the army in other support roles. Meanwhile, African American enlistment in the U.S. Navy, which had never formally excluded African American sailors, skyrocketed. By 1864, more than twenty percent of the enlisted men in the Union navy were African American.

African American men were officially allowed to enlist in the Union army after the Emancipation Proclamation was issued on January 1, 1863. Many served in regiments designated U.S.C.T., for "United States Colored Troops," including the 54th Massachusetts regiment, which gained renown for its role in the assault on Fort Wagner in South Carolina. By the end of the war, approximately 180,000 African American soldiers had served in the Union army, making up about ten percent of its soldiers.



54th Massachusetts regiment
<https://www.loc.gov/item/2001699787/>

African American soldiers were photographed in training camp, on the field of battle, and in portrait studios, and some illustrations in northern newspapers and magazines depicted soldiers of the U.S.C.T. as heroes of the cause of liberty. However, African American soldiers regularly faced discrimination

in the Union army, were paid less, and given fewer opportunities for advancement than white soldiers were. In many ways, African American soldiers fought two wars: one against Confederate troops, and one within their own army for equal treatment.

Although African American women could not join the military, many served as nurses or participated in less formal roles. Sojourner Truth recruited troops for the Union army and Harriet Tubman worked as a spy, becoming the first woman in U.S. history to lead a military expedition. Free African Americans in both Union and Confederate territory took paying work that supported the war effort. At the same time, African Americans living in slavery were often hired out by their owners to work in the Confederate war effort, often as laborers and servants, and some slaveholders who joined the Confederate army brought enslaved servants with them to war.



Harriet Tubman
<https://www.loc.gov/item/2018645050/>

After the war, African American veterans remained in the public eye, participating in the debates over voting rights and eventually serving among the first African Americans elected to Congress. They also participated in events to honor the war dead and joined veterans' organizations, although many such groups remained segregated for decades.

SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

Ask students to select an image of African Americans during the Civil War and to explore what the war might have meant to the individuals depicted in the image. What was each individual's personal stake in it? What led to their involvement? Ask students to identify specific evidence in the image for their claim. Finally, ask students to speculate about how the individuals in the image might have depicted themselves differently if they had created the image.

Support students as they observe and analyze several images of African Americans who participated in the Civil War, and then speculate about whether these images represent Union or Confederate perspectives. Ask them to consider: What are African Americans shown doing in each? What surprises you about the depictions? How do these images change or strengthen your understanding of attitudes toward African Americans in the Union and the Confederacy?

Direct students to find the origins of the term "contraband of war," later shortened to "contraband." Give each student one or more depictions of people described as contraband during the Civil War. Ask them to observe and record their thinking on the Library's Primary Source Analysis Tool. Ask students: What's happening in this image? Who do you think was the audience for this image? What can you learn about people who were designated contraband from examining this image? What questions do you have about contraband status? Facilitate a conversation exploring the significance of the term "contraband" in this usage.

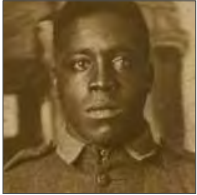
In the early days of photography, people often carefully selected the items that they would be photographed with. Invite students to look at one or more posed portraits from the set, such as the portrait of Sojourner Truth, and focus on any objects with the person. What might these objects tell a viewer about what was important to the person?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



The Liljenquist Family Collection of Civil War Photographs

<https://www.loc.gov/collections/liljenquist-civil-war-photographs/>



The Gladstone Collection of African American Photographs

<https://www.loc.gov/collections/gladstone-african-american-photographs/>

PRIMARY SOURCES WITH CITATIONS



Dutch Gap, Virginia. Picket station of Colored troops near Dutch Gap canal. Nov, 1864. Photograph. From Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

<https://www.loc.gov/item/cwp2003004888/PP/>



Currier & Ives. *The gallant charge of the fifty fourth Massachusetts colored regiment: on the rebel works at Fort Wagner, Morris Island, near Charleston, July 18th 1863, and death of Colonel Robt. G. Shaw.* New York: Currier & Ives, Sept. 11, 1863. Image. From Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

<https://www.loc.gov/item/2001699787/>



[Unidentified African American sailor in Union uniform sitting with arm resting on table]. 1863-65. Photograph. From Library of Congress, Liljenquist Family Collection of Civil War Photographs.

<https://www.loc.gov/item/2010648851/>



[Portrait of Harriet Tubman] / Powelson, photographer, 77 Genesee St., Auburn, New York. [1868 or 1869]. [Auburn, N.Y.] : [Benjamin Powelson] From Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

<https://www.loc.gov/item/2018645050/>



[Civil War envelope showing fugitive slaves working as sappers and miners with General Benjamin Butler, bearing message "Contraband of war"]. 1861-1865. Envelope. From Library of Congress, Liljenquist Family Collection of Civil War Photographs.

<https://www.loc.gov/item/2013645995/>



Gibson, James F., B. 1828, photographer. *[Cumberland Landing, Va. Group of "contrabands" at Foller's house].* 1862. Photograph. From Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

<https://www.loc.gov/item/cwp2003000055/PP/>



24th Regt. U.S. Colored Troops. Let Soldiers in War, Be Citizens in Peace. Photograph. [ca. 1865?] From Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

<https://www.loc.gov/item/2010647924/>



Smith, William Morris, photographer. *[District of Columbia. Company E, 4th U.S. Colored Infantry, at Fort Lincoln]*. 1863-66. Photograph. From Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

<https://www.loc.gov/item/cwp2003000946/PP/>



[Sojourner Truth seated with photograph of her grandson, James Caldwell of Co. H, 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment, on her lap]. 1863. [Battle Creek, Michigan: Publisher not identified] Photograph. From Library of Congress, *Liljenquist Family Collection of Civil War Photographs*.

<https://www.loc.gov/item/2017648645/>



Nast, Thomas, artist. *Pardon. Franchise. Columbia* – "Shall I trust these men, and not this man?" New York: Harper's Magazine Co., August 5, 1865. Image. From Library of Congress, *Ben and Beatrice Goldstein Foundation Collection*.

<https://www.loc.gov/item/2010644408/>



M. & N. Hanhart Chromo Lith. "*Confederate camp*" during the late American war. London: Louis Zimmer, 1871. Chromolithograph. From Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

<https://www.loc.gov/item/2006686265/>



View of transparency in front of headquarters of supervisory committee for recruiting colored regiments, Chesnut Street, Philadelphia, in commemoration of emancipation in Maryland, November 1, 1864. Philadelphia: Ringwald & Brown, 1864. Photograph. From Library of Congress.

<https://www.loc.gov/item/scsm000423/>



Smith, William Morris, photographer. *Maj. H.H. Humphrey and others*. June, 1865. Photograph. From Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

<https://www.loc.gov/item/2002712119/>



Cooley, Sam A., photographer. *[Beaufort, South Carolina. 29th Regiment from Connecticut]*. 1864. Photograph. From Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

<https://www.loc.gov/item/cwp2003001314/PP/>



[Sergeant Tom Strawn of Company B, 3rd U.S. Colored Troops Heavy Artillery Regiment, with revolver in front of painted backdrop showing balustrade and landscape]. 1863-65. Photograph. From Library of Congress, Liljenquist Family Collection of Civil War Photographs.
<https://www.loc.gov/item/2012646982/>



[Sergeant A.M. Chandler of the 44th Mississippi Infantry Regiment, Co. F., and Silas Chandler, family slave, with Bowie knives, revolvers, pepper-box, shotgun, and canteen]. 1861-63. Photograph. From Library of Congress, Liljenquist Family Collection of Civil War Photographs.
<https://www.loc.gov/item/2014647512/>



Waud, Alfred R., artist. "The first vote". Illustration. Harper's Weekly, From Library of Congress, November 16, 1867. From Library of Congress, Ben and Beatrice Goldstein Foundation Collection.
<https://www.loc.gov/item/2011648984/>



Negro G.A.R. veterans parading, New York City, May 30, 1912. 1912. Photograph. From Library of Congress, George Grantham Bain Collection.
<https://www.loc.gov/item/2003668501/>